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ABSTRACT

A study examined the relationship of the personality traits of 94 police cadets to their performance at a southwestern state law enforcement academy. The overall training success (percentage of total points earned) of recruits enrolled in 11 weeks of on-site training classes was the primary criterion of the study, and raw personality factor scores and demographic variables served as predictors. The sample differed significantly from population norms on one-half of the primary source personality traits, with recruits being more emotionally stable, conscientious, self-reliant, self-assured, conservative in their thinking, relaxed, and socially precise than the general public. Higher educational levels and preference for theoretical courses were significantly related to good academy performance; gender was also significant, with males scoring higher than females. As expected, general intelligence was associated with overall training achievement, although it failed to discriminate graduates from dropouts. The finding of a significant relationship between higher general intelligence and higher criterion scores is not to suggest that personality traits and attitudes are entirely independent of training achievement. Persistent and conscientious individuals who prefer an academic training curriculum are also likely to perform well. (MN)

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PERSONALITY TRAITS OF POLICE CADETS: RELATIONSHIP TO ACADEMY PERFORMANCE

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Personality Traits of Police Cadets: Relationship to Academy Performance

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The profound impact of personnel selection programs on industrial productivity has become increasingly evident in light of new techniques for estimating economic utility (Hunter & Schmidt, 1983). Personnel selection in law enforcement is equally important, not only for organizational effectiveness, but for the protection of other police officers and the general public, as well. Although personnel selection procedures for police recruits typically involve administration of a host of evaluative measures, many of these measures bear little relationship to established criteria (Lefkowitz, 1977). For example, despite the fact that police recruits are generally commissioned only after successful completion of an accredited program of training, validation studies of police personnel selection procedures have rarely used training success as a criterion. The purpose of our study was, therefore, to replicate and extend previous research findings concerning the personality traits of police officers by clarifying how these traits relate specifically to training performance and attrition.

Our strategy in this study was to administer a background questionnaire and standardized trait inventory to a sample of police recruits as they entered a rigorous training academy. The results of these measures were then compared to each recruit's overall training success. Based on previous research (see Poland, 1978, for a review), we expected general intellectual ability and previous education to play an important role in training achievement. But law enforcement training is often emotionally, as well as intellectually, taxing. We, therefore, anticipated that other personality attributes (e.g., high self-concept, independence, persistence) would discriminate academy graduates from dropouts. In other words, we expected that personality factors would be predictive of academy success or failure, whereas prior education and intelligence would be associated with level of training achievement, assuming a recruit completed the academy.

Another limitation of research related to police personnel selection has been sample selection. That is, previous studies have generally focused on a single law enforcement agency at one level of jurisdiction. Therefore, although there are underlying traits and attitudes which characterize police officers regardless of jurisdiction, the question remains whether a test which is valid for the selection of a rural deputy sheriff will be equally valid for the selection of a municipal patrolman. Although this study was not designed to directly test this supposition, the present sample was quite heterogeneous in occupational classification. We reasoned that if the validity of a trait measure in police selection is specific to a particular job class, then pooling these groups in this study should wash out potential relationships. Conversely, validity coefficients of a reasonable magnitude would be prima facie evidence for validity generalization in police personnel selection.

Method

Subjects and design. The sample comprised 94 recruits enrolled in three classes of a southwestern state law enforcement academy. Recruits from 27 organizations representing municipal, county, state, military, and tribal law enforcement agencies were included. Overall training success (percentage of total points earned) served as the primary criterion in the study, whereas raw personality factor scores and demographic variables served as predictors.

Training program. Each class completed 11 weeks of on-site training and received instruction in: (a) Introduction to law enforcement, (b) Law and legal matters, (c) Patrol procedures, (d) Traffic control, (e) Criminal investigation, (f) Community and police relations, (g) Records and reports, (h) Police proficiency skills, and (i) Administrative time. Recruits were tested in over 40 areas of competency and could earn a total score of 600 points.

Background questionnaire and trait inventory. An 11-item questionnaire, constructed by the authors, provided information concerning gender, ethnicity, income, educational experience, and educational preference; that is, whether the recruit preferred a practical approach to training which emphasized "hands-on" experience, or a traditional academic approach emphasizing theory. Form C of the 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire (16 PF) was the trait measure (IPAT, 1972).

Procedure. Subjects were enrolled in one of three academy classes commencing in April, June, and July of 1984. The background questionnaire, followed by the 16 PF, were administered to each group on the first day of the academy. Data concerning overall training achievement were obtained from academy records.

Results

Demographics. The sample was predominantly male (81.9%) with a mean age of 27.7 years (SD = 5.5). One-third of the sample had not attended college. The largest ethnic subgroup was Caucasian (59.6%), followed by Hispanic and Native American (both 19.1%).

Personality variables. In order to clarify how recruits compared to the general population in terms of personality traits, we compared mean factor scores of the full sample against norms for the general population. The sample differed significantly from population norms on one-half of the primary source traits. Recruits were more emotionally stable, conscientious, self-reliant, and practical than the general public. In addition, they were more self-assured, conservative in their thinking, more relaxed, and socially precise. This trait profile speaks well of the personnel selection/screening systems used by agencies in the sample and lends support to the notion of a unique police personality.

Our next goal was to determine how the 28 of the 94 students who failed to complete the academy differed from their successful counterparts. Graduates differed significantly from dropouts on six primary traits, four of which (C, O, Q_3, and Q_4) had also differentiated the entire sample from population norms. In addition, graduates were more outgoing and participating (A+), and more venturesome (H+) than dropouts, suggesting that these two traits are "something extra" which characterize the academy graduate.

In order to determine whether the traits that discriminate dropouts from graduates are associated with level of achievement for successful recruits, we used a forward selection strategy to regress raw factor scores against the total training scores of graduates. The correlation between recruit scores on Q_3 and total training scores was .33. When Factor B (a general measure of intelligence) was combined with Q_3, the multiple correlation increased to .40. Both of these factors showed a positive relationship to training achievement; higher academy scores were associated with recruits who were conscientious and persistent (Q_3) as well as brighter. Q_3, therefore, differentiated the entire sample from the general population, as well as graduates from dropouts.

We next performed a separate analysis regressing questionnaire responses against total training scores. Level of education was significantly correlated (.39) with academy performance; that is, higher educational levels were associated with higher academy scores. There was also a significant relationship between educational preference and academy performance; that is, recruits who expressed a preference for academic, "theory" classes tended to perform better than those who preferred a practical training approach. It is interesting to note that educational preference contributed to the prediction of criterion performance above and beyond prior education. Gender was also associated with academy performance; males achieved higher scores than females.

Discussion

As expected, general intelligence was associated with overall training achievement, although it failed to discriminate graduates from dropouts. Prior education was also correlated with training achievement, although graduates and dropouts did not differ significantly across the eight response categories. We interpret these results as meaning that neither aptitude nor educational deficits are prime suspects in law enforcement training attrition. Rather, the findings suggest that measurable personality traits are better indicators of whether or not a recruit will graduate from an academy. The other side of the coin is, given recruits who complete the academy, those with higher levels of prior education and general intelligence will probably achieve higher criterion scores. This is not to suggest that personality traits and attitudes are entirely independent of training achievement. Persistent and conscientious individuals who prefer an academic training curriculum are also likely to perform well.

These findings are of relevance to the theoretical and practical issues confronting those who study police officers. The manner in which this group differed from the general population suggests recruits were neither domineering and aggressive caricatures nor average men-on-the-street. In addition, while personality attributes probably play a role in level of training success, they appear to be particularly important in the prediction of training attrition. This is especially important in light of costs associated with recruiting, hiring, housing, and training personnel who may never serve in their position. Most important, these findings demonstrate the utility of normative trait assessment in police officer selection, and suggest that test validity may generalize across jurisdictional lines (i.e., job class).

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